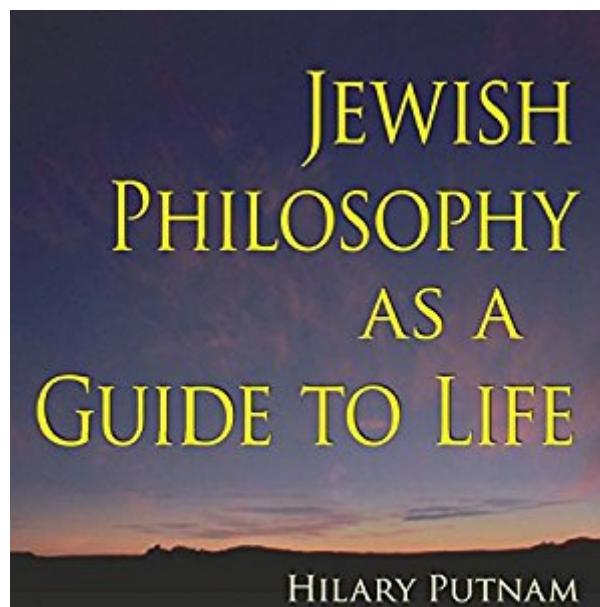




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Jewish Philosophy As A Guide To Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein (The Helen And Martin Schwartz Lectures In Jewish Studies)



Synopsis

Distinguished philosopher Hilary Putnam, who is also a practicing Jew, questions the thought of three major Jewish philosophers of the 20th century - Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas -- to help him reconcile the philosophical and religious sides of his life. An additional presence in the book is Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, although not a practicing Jew, thought about religion in ways that Putnam juxtaposes to the views of Rosenzweig, Buber, and Levinas. Putnam explains the leading ideas of each of these great thinkers, bringing out what, in his opinion, constitutes the decisive intellectual and spiritual contributions of each of them. Although the religion discussed is Judaism, the depth and originality of these philosophers, as incisively interpreted by Putnam, make their thought nothing less than a guide to life.

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Customer Reviews

My friend Robin Friedman, a Hall of Fame top 100 reviewers, wrote an excellent comprehensive review of this book, as he usually does. He describes the man and his book, gives us an understanding of the thinking of the three philosophers that Putnam discusses, and tells us that Putnam's aim was to provide insights to a good life and a religious life, more than a philosophy of Judaism. He informs us that the philosophers that Putnam discusses share the view of experiential philosophy, that philosophy should be developed from inside, from personal experiences, not from abstractions, and more. It is hard to add to Robin Friedman's writings, but I will try by addressing a few items that Robin Friedman

did not address. Putnam tells us that in the past, he had two parts of himself, a religious part and a purely philosophical part, and he is attempting to reconcile them, for people who feel attached to religion should be unwilling to turn their back on modernity. This is an important idea because too many people live a schizophrenic life, a life without direction, a life of conflicts. Putnam gives us insights to the understanding of the philosopher Rosenzweig and others. For example, Rosenzweig says *“the awareness of being loved by a personal God arrives in some sense prior to my hearing the command in the Bible. (The italics is by Putnam.)* For Rosenzweig the veracity of biblical stories was not important, but its message is important. Rosenzweig believed that the world will be redeemed in the future and this idea is important to Judaism, but he recognized that he had no idea how specifically this will occur; yet, he felt, significantly, that this change must begin now in the life of every individual. We must be *“moral perfectionists.* We must be able to answer the question *“Am I living as I am supposed to live,* by answering *“Yes.* He tells us that Levinas taught that all we know about God is what God asks of us: total willingness to help others. Our fundamental obligation is to make ourselves available to the needs of others. We must learn to sacrifice for others. Yet, at the same time, we must not regard others as being obligated as we are. Putnam states that he disagrees with Levinas on this point and accepts the view of Buber: total responsibility for others *“seems to me to go beyond what is right to demand.* Whether one agrees with Putnam’s philosophy of life or not, this book is important because it prompts us to think and perhaps even change our behavior and society for the better.

The American philosopher Hilary Putnam has had a long and varied philosophical career. Putnam began as an analytic philosopher steeped in mathematical logic. He subsequently became an adherent of a new form of American pragmatism. His debates with the late Richard Rorty over the content of this pragmatism became well-known. Putnam is famous for his receptivity to new ideas and for his frequent changes in his own philosophical positions. Putnam is also a practicing, if not a traditional, Jew. In his most recent book, "Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life" (2008), Putnam explores the thought of three contemporary Jewish philosophers (or 3 1/4, including Wittgenstein) to discuss what these thinkers have to offer in understanding religious life. The three Twentieth Century Jewish philosophers Putnam considers are Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas. Putnam’s book is short, just over 100 pages, and based in part upon lectures he delivered at Indiana University in 1999. But the book, and the thinkers Putnam describes, are

complex and difficult. Putnam's aim is to encourage his readers to explore the works of these philosophers for themselves for whatever insights they can provide into the good life and the religious life. Putnam's aim thus is far broader than providing a philosophy for Judaism. He believes that the thinkers he discusses have much to teach people struggling with religious questions, whether they are Jewish, a member of another religion, or have no particular religious affiliation at all. A great virtue of this book lies in its highly personal tone. In an introductory chapter, Putnam describes his steadily growing Jewish practice, which began about 1975. He also describes the difficulty he faced and continues to face in reconciling his religious commitments to his philosophical naturalism. This theme is reiterated in the "Afterword" to the book, as Putnam describes his own religious ideas ("somewhere between John Dewey in 'A Common Faith' and Martin Buber") and tries to summarize briefly what he has learned from Rosenzweig, Buber, and Levinas. In spite of the major differences among the thinkers he discusses, Putnam finds they have in common a commitment to experiential philosophy. "Experiential Philosophy" is itself difficult to understand. It involves a rejection of essentialism -- that is of traditional philosophical speculation -- and a commitment to philosophy as narrative in a face-to-face discussion with other human beings about what is important in life. Religion, for the philosophers Putnam discusses, is to be lived from the inside, from felt experience, rather than studied through abstractions. Putnam devotes two chapters to Franz Rosenzweig, the first of which focuses on a short late work "Understanding the Sick and the Healthy" while the second focuses on Rosenzweig's lengthy and obscure masterwork "The Star of Redemption." He explores Rosenzweig's highly personal account of God -- Man -- and World and the redirection Rosenzweig gave to the religious doctrines of revelation, redemption, and, of overwhelming importance, love. Putnam, again, takes Rosenzweig out of his own essentially Jewish context and tries to show that he has much of significance to offer to people of whatever, if any, denomination. Although Martin Buber appears to be the closest to Putnam of the philosophers he discusses, he receives the shortest chapter in the book, in which Putnam offers an overview to Buber's famous "I and Thou". Putnam attempts to correct misreadings of this frequently undervalued work which, together with Dewey's pragmatism, seems of especial significance to him. Putnam devotes a lengthy chapter to the late Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas is a profoundly original thinker whose best-known work remains "Totality and Infinity." Putnam's account focuses on later and even more difficult works. Although an orthodox Jew, Levinas, for Putnam, universalizes Judaism. Levinas' thought focuses on ethical immediacy and on otherness -- the unquestioned existence of people outside ourselves who have a claim on the individual to work tirelessly for their welfare. (Something in this teaching reminded me of the Dalai Lama, a comparison Putnam does not

make.) Levinas rejects conceptualization as a basis for religion or philosophy focusing on otherness, and on the character of the ethical moment. Each of these philosophers has much to teach. Putnam has, indeed, fulfilled the task he set himself of encouraging readers to explore these sources. This still leaves the question of the relationship between Putnam's religious commitments and his philosophical ones. In the afterword to his book, Putnam states that he views God as an ideal rather than as an existing being and that he disbelieves in an afterlife or in supernatural intervention in human or natural affairs. He also states that he is heavily influenced by the dialogic philosophy he finds in Buber. In all this, there still seems to be two sides to Putnam, the religious individual and the naturalistic, pragmatic philosopher, that rest uneasily with each other. Yet, this book is a moving exploration of themes and questions that may offer guidance and suggestions to readers in search of a modern personally-felt religious life. Robin Friedman

The book itself is good, but the audiobook reading is marred by distractingly incorrect pronunciations of philosophers' names. At the beginning, it is much worse. After the introduction, the pronunciations are gradually corrected, which is sort of bizarre. It seems like the beginning of the book should have been re-recorded, for the sake of consistency and accuracy.

This book is very interesting because it is one of the most personal writings of Putnam. Most of all, it is touching to see this great philosopher thinking about the contradictions he sees in his own intellectual curriculum. Nevertheless, one can feel sometimes very surprised by some sort of naivety appearing in the self-description of his intellectual positions, intellectual roots and intuitions. Because, contrary to what he says (and feels), the link between the anti-idolatric religious philosophies he chooses to elect - at the dawn of his life - and the old "linguisticism" and anti-representationism of his own approaches first in the philosophy of mathematics, then in the philosophy of mind and action (see his recent pragmatic turn - which could have been anticipated 30 years ago) appears perfectly understandable to any philosopher who knows a little about history of philosophy and ideas and who is not only focused on the 3 last papers of the Journal of Symbolic Logic.

If you enjoy esoteric intellectual exercises with complicated sentence structure, this is a good book for you. If you want to use Jewish philosophy as a guide to your life, read the Torah.

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